

your health

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Heart Attack Symptoms

Chest pain can be associated with many things. It can be related to your heart, or it can be a sign that there is a problem in another body system, such as your lungs or intestines.

The best way to determine the cause of chest pain is to be seen by a doctor. **Chest pain can mean a life-threatening condition. So see a doctor immediately.**

What does a heart attack feel like?

The pain of a heart attack differs from person to person. Many people describe it as a heavy pressure or squeezing sensation in the center of the chest. Others report a stabbing feeling. At times the pain may spread to the left arm, jaw or back. The intensity of the pain does not always indicate the degree of heart damage that may be occurring. Some people don't have any symptoms during a heart attack.

A characteristic of chest pain associated with a heart attack is that it is often unrelenting. Once it begins, there is usually

nothing that you can do at home to stop the pain. Pain does not improve with rest, position changes, over-the-counter medications or even nitroglycerin.

Often, people who are having a heart attack describe other symptoms associated with the chest pain. These may include:

- Sweating
- Dizziness
- Shortness of breath
- Palpitations
- Paleness
- Nausea and vomiting

An anxious feeling with a sense of impending doom. Some people, especially women, people with diabetes and the elderly, do not have typical heart attack symptoms. While these people often have chest pain, it may be mild. They may more commonly complain of neck, shoulder, and belly pain; breathlessness, heartburn, nausea, and lasting tiredness.

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Laughter Can Boost Heart

HealthResearch finds it improves blood flow and may help ward off high blood pressure

New research lends weight to the old adage that laughter can be powerful medicine, particularly when it comes to your heart.

Two studies presented at the American College of Sports Medicine's annual meeting in Seattle found that laughter not only can reduce stress, which can damage the heart, it can lead to improved blood flow, which can help ward off high blood pressure.

The first study included a small group of healthy adults who were asked to watch either a comedy or documentary film. They were then checked for activity of the carotid arteries -- the main arteries in the neck that bring blood to the brain and face -- during the films.

People who watched the comedy displayed improved "arterial compliance" -- the amount of blood that moves

through the arteries at a given time. Decreased arterial compliance is often linked with high blood pressure and heart disease, according to an American College of Sports Medicine news release.

"Arterial compliance was improved for a full 24 hours after subjects watched a funny movie," said lead researcher Jun Sugawara. "Laughing is likely not the complete solution to a healthy heart, but it appears to contribute to positive effects."

The second study focused on vascular function and the dilation of blood vessels. When a second group of adults watched either a comedy or a serious documentary, there was more dilation of blood vessels during the comedy. Constricted blood vessels can be a cause of high blood pressure, the news release said.

"Not only did comedies improve vascular dilation, but watching a documentary about a depressing subject was actually harmful to the blood vessels," said Takashi Tarumi, lead researcher on the second study. "These documentaries constricted blood vessels by about 18 percent."

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Eating a Heart Healthy Diet

Learn how to eat a heart healthy diet.

Diseases of the heart are the leading causes of death in the United States of America. Heart disease affects both men and women and people of all races. Diet and exercise can directly affect your heart health by decreasing your chances of developing conditions such as high blood pressure, high blood cholesterol levels, obesity, and the heart healthy diet helps control diabetes, too.

If you eat a heart healthy diet that is low in sodium, saturated fat (which directly affects the LDL cholesterol levels), trans fats and cholesterol, and at the same time high in soluble fiber, you can improve your heart health. It is also important to make achieving a healthy weight one of your goals, in order to decrease your chances of developing coronary heart disease (CHD).

The American Heart Association (AHA) recommends:

- Eat lots of vegetables and fruits. They are high in vitamins, minerals and fiber and they're low in calories. Eating a variety of fruits and vegetables may help you control your weight and your blood pressure.
- Choose unrefined whole-grain foods that contain fiber. Fiber can help lower your blood cholesterol and help you feel full, which may help you manage your weight.
- Eat fish at least twice a week. Recent research shows that eating oily fish containing omega-3 fatty acids (for example, salmon, trout, and herring) may help lower your risk of death from coronary artery disease.
- Choose lean meats and poultry. Remove extra fat and skin and broil, sauté or cook meat without saturated and trans fat.

- Select fat-free, 1 percent fat, and low-fat dairy products.
- Cut back on foods containing trans fats, look for partially hydrogenated vegetable oils on the ingredient list.
- Cut back on foods high in dietary cholesterol. Aim to eat less than 300 milligrams of cholesterol each day.
- Cut back on beverages and foods with added sugars.
- Choose and prepare foods with little or no salt. Aim to eat less than 2,300 milligrams of sodium per day. Don't add salt to foods at the table.
- If you drink alcohol, drink in moderation. That is one drink per day if you're a woman and two drinks per day if you're a man.
- Keep an eye on your portion sizes and try to follow the above recommendations when you eat out.

For those trying to lose weight, exercise plays an important role. It is recommended to participate in exercise 30 minutes per day most days of the week for adults. Exercising regularly promotes weight loss and increases the "good" cholesterol, thus clearing the arteries for blood to flow more freely. Speak to your health care professional for the safest exercise for you.

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Heart Palpitations: When It's Nothing, When It's Serious

Most of the time, a heart palpitation is nothing to worry about. Find out when this symptom could mean more.

Ever feel like your heart is skipping a beat? Fluttering around inside your chest? Pounding too hard or too fast? You are probably having heart palpitations. Most of the time, heart palpitations are harmless. But, at times, they can signal an underlying health problem or a heart condition that requires immediate treatment.

Most people who have heart palpitations don't need treatment. If you have them, though, check with your doctor to see if you need treatment.

Have the following information ready for your doctor:

- Write down every time you have palpitations
- Tell the doctor:
 - When they usually happen.
 - How often you get them.
 - How long they last.
 - If your heartbeat feels slow, fast or irregular. Take your pulse if you can.
 - About any food, drink, drugs or activities that seem to bring them on or make them go away.

When you have palpitations, relax as much as you can. Try breathing deeply in through your nose and out through your mouth.

Seeking immediate help

Call 9-1-1 right away if you have any of the following along with palpitations:

- Fainting or near-fainting
- Dizziness, lightheadedness or abnormal fatigue
- Chest pain, or pain in the upper back, arms, or jaw
- Shortness of breath
- Nausea or indigestion

Also, seek help right away if the palpitations are new or came on suddenly and you have:

- Palpitations that are prolonged or recurrent
- High blood pressure
- Heart disease
- Thyroid disease

- Diabetes
- Any other chronic illness, or if you are pregnant or frail
- A family history of sudden cardiac death or heart rhythm problems

Treatment plan

Treatment for heart palpitations, if you need it, depends on the underlying cause. Other medical conditions may need to be controlled first to stop the palpitations.

For example, if you have hormone changes due to menopause, your doctor may not suggest any treatment. If you have anemia (too few red blood cells), treating that condition could end the palpitations.

If your palpitations are:

- Prolonged or are due to a heart-related problem: You may need medicine to help your heart work better.
- Caused by an underlying structural problem, such as heart valve disease: Surgery may be an option. For a faulty valve, your doctor may suggest having it surgically repaired or replaced.
- Caused by an abnormally fast or slow heart beat (arrhythmia): Medications to control the heart rate, or sometimes a pacemaker, is needed.

A thorough medical history, physical exam, testing and cardiac monitoring may fail to show abnormalities as being the cause of palpitations. If so, you may just need to avoid situations, food and drink that can trigger them.

Prevention

Anyone can have heart palpitations. But reducing the risk factors for heart disease can help your heart stay healthy. These heart-healthy practices may help reduce palpitations and prevent heart disease:

- Don't smoke.
- Cut down on caffeine.
- Limit alcohol.
- Don't use illegal drugs, such as cocaine.
- Eat a well-balanced, low-fat diet.
- Exercise regularly (check with your doctor before you start).
- Use stress management techniques, such as deep breathing and yoga.
- Keep blood pressure and cholesterol under control.

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Learning from the WISE Women: Finding Heart Disease in Women

Find out what makes a woman's heart tick.

Heart disease often looks different in women than it does in the typical male, researchers say. Because of this, it's not easily seen with the usual tests. Traditional surgical procedures may not work either. For many women, this may mean heart disease goes undetected and untreated. But a landmark study is changing how doctors test and treat women with heart disease.

Not your every day plaque

The multi-center study is called The Women's Ischemia Syndrome Evaluation (WISE). It has found that plaque is different in women.

Plaque is the buildup of cholesterol and other substances along the lining of the main arteries in the body, including the heart. We usually think of the plaque building up in the big arteries supplying the heart, creating an obvious blockage that reduces blood flow. At least two things are different in women:

- **Plaque builds up more evenly along artery walls.** So, it doesn't always look like the obvious "roadblock" plaque

that's most typical in men. This is due to differences in the cells lining the heart's arteries. The diffuse buildup also makes blood vessels less elastic, so they can't dilate as well for increased blood flow. This form of heart disease is also hard to diagnose using traditional tests such as angiogram, which is designed to pick up the bulging artery-blocking plaque.

- **Plaque buildup affects the tiny blood vessels in the heart, rather than the major arteries.** This is called microvascular or microvessel disease. It's also more common in people with diabetes. Coronary artery disease in the tiny blood vessels in the heart must be treated differently because surgeons can't get in there with angioplasty, stents or bypass surgery. Instead, doctors rely more on medications to control symptoms.

What's it mean to you?

Heart disease in women may, at best, be harder to diagnose. At worst, it could go unrecognized.

If you have symptoms or risk factors for heart disease, be clear about them with your doctor. Learn about your risk factors and how you can take control of those you can change. Meanwhile, researchers are working to find new ways to diagnose and treat heart disease in women.

By Geri K. Metzger, Contributing Writer
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BNP: A Blood Test That Can Detect Heart Failure

Learn how this quick test is used to diagnose and monitor heart failure.

Blood tests can explain a lot about your health. To find or monitor heart failure, your doctor may check the level of BNP, or b-type natriuretic peptide, in your blood.

BNP is a protein that your heart makes in response to heart failure. A simple blood test measures how much of this protein you have.

- High levels of BNP can show that you have heart failure or that it's getting worse.
- Lower levels of BNP may mean that heart failure is stable or that heart failure is not the right diagnosis.
- Sometimes this test is used in emergency settings to determine whether a person's breathing problems are caused by heart failure or another problem, such as lung disease.

A BNP test is fast and inexpensive. It's now used more often to monitor how heart failure is progressing. But experts say that more studies are needed to prove how effective a BNP test is for guiding treatment.

BNP and your heart

Your heart secretes BNP to maintain blood pressure and to keep your body from holding on to extra salt (sodium) and water. BNP relaxes blood vessels and helps your body move sodium to your kidneys and out into your urine.

In heart failure, the heart has to work harder to pump blood, or it may have problems filling normally with blood. This can cause fluid to build up in the lungs and other parts of the body.

High levels of BNP show that your body is releasing more of the protein to ease this strain on your heart.

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